

# **WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC CALENDAR**

## **Semesters vs. Quarters**

December 2000

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **OVERVIEW**

In its 2000 supplemental operating budget, the Legislature directed the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) to study the feasibility of Washington State University (WSU) moving from a semester system to a quarter system, and to report back with recommendations by December, 2000. Currently, all Washington community colleges and public baccalaureate institutions, except WSU, operate on a quarter system.

HECB staff gathered information from 28 states representing 50 state systems and the District of Columbia or individual institutions in the form of a literature search and SHEEO listserve request (see appendix). In addition, this report also examines the feasibility of aligning the state universities and colleges under either a single semester system or quarter system.

#### **STUDY FINDINGS**

Based on large-scale reports published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and others, most universities across the country operate on a semester system rather than a quarter system, with the most common being an early semester system with the first semester ending before Christmas. Universities that have changed their academic calendars over the past 30 years generally have switched from a quarter system to a semester system. State legislatures, trustees or regents, and individual institutions have initiated these changes.

Proponents of the semester system cite lower costs, administrative efficiency, and a superior academic environment that allows students and faculty more time for in-depth study. However, the institutions studied had no solid evidence to support their inclinations. In addition, most of the individuals contacted agreed that no compelling evidence or research exists to support the contention that teaching/learning, research, service, or efficient use of resources is better under one system or the other.

#### **WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY'S POSITION**

The State College of Washington (WSU) began its academic program in 1892 on the three-quarter system and adopted the semester calendar in fall 1894. With the exception of one academic year (1918-19) during World War I, WSU has remained on a semester system.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Washington State University Libraries, *The Semester V.S. the Quarter Plan for the State college of Washington*, February 15, 1949

Currently, Washington State University operates upper-division branch campuses in Spokane, the Tri-Cities, and Vancouver. For the Tri-Cities and Vancouver in particular, articulation between the local community colleges and branch campuses is essential for students to move efficiently from lower to upper-division study. WSU Vancouver operates on a semester system while Clark Community College operates on a quarter system. Administrators at the WSU Vancouver branch campus believe that the different systems do impact articulation and would prefer to see both systems utilizing the same calendar, preferably a semester calendar. They specifically cite problems in aligning sequential courses.

WSU administrators do not believe that the all-encompassing and expensive change from semesters to quarters would be the best use of state resources and faculty time, especially in light of the national trend in the opposite direction from quarters to semesters. They are finding very successful ways to articulate with community colleges, in particular, and believe that higher education will become less dependent on time schedules, as technology plays an increasingly larger role in how we work and learn. However, if the Legislature directs and funds the academic calendar change, WSU will certainly follow through.

## **RECOMMENDATION AND ISSUES FOR FURTHER STUDY**

HECB staff recommends that WSU maintain its current semester calendar based on the following:

- In every case study examined, there was no clear benefit to operating under one system over the other;
- The cost of changing the curriculum from one system to another is far higher than the marginal administrative savings or perceived benefits;
- A move from semesters to quarters runs counter to the national trend of institutions moving from quarters to semesters;
- Degree audit systems and course alignment methods (e.g., Course Applicability System) exist to accommodate student mobility regardless of the academic calendar employed.

In addition, HECB staff recommends that the state further examine the following issues:

- The impact of semesters versus quarters on student retention;
- Alignment issues with the K-12 system and K-12 reform;
- Capability of the Course Applicability System to accommodate student mobility;
- Coordinated delivery of classes and compatibility with the other universities participating in distance learning (e.g., Western Governor's Coalition).

## WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC CALENDAR Semesters vs. Quarters

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### BACKGROUND

In its 2000 supplemental operating budget, the Legislature directed the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) to study the feasibility of Washington State University (WSU) moving from a semester system to a quarter system, and to report back with recommendations by December, 2000. Currently, all Washington community colleges and public baccalaureate institutions, except WSU, operate on a quarter system.

HECB staff gathered information from 28 states representing 50 state systems and the District of Columbia, and individual institutions in the form of a literature search and SHEEO listserve request (see appendix). In addition, this report also examines the feasibility of aligning the state universities and colleges under either a single semester system or quarter system.

### A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nationally, there have been two large-scale efforts to move institutions from one academic calendar to another. Both efforts moved institutions from a semester to a quarter calendar.

The first was a national effort as a result of a federal wartime directive in 1918. The U.S. War Department imposed the quarter system on all colleges that participated in the Student Army Training Corps program in order to prepare more officers for the battlefield in a shorter period of time. As the war began to wind down in 1919, some institutions, such as the University of Washington, retained the quarter system while Washington State University reverted to a semester calendar by the margin of a single faculty vote.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s, states began another fairly large-scale effort to move institutions to a quarter calendar. Several state postsecondary systems converted to a quarter system as directed by their regents (e.g. Ohio) or by state legislature (e.g. California). Although no specific rationale was stated, the most common anecdotal reason appears to be “managerial/fiscal management ease.” In other words, state legislatures and university regents wanted every institution to operate on the same calendar. However, the 1960s were also a period in which more students were entering postsecondary education, including Vietnam veterans taking advantage of the G.I. Bill, and individuals wishing to avoid the conflict through student deferment. Perhaps, operating on a quarter system permitted these institutions to offer more units of study over a year to accommodate the increased demand.

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<sup>2</sup> Washington State University Libraries, *The Semester V.S. the Quarter Plan for the State college of Washington*, February 15, 1949

Ironically, the same “managerial/fiscal management ease” urgency that drove boards of regents to abandon semesters for quarters in the 1960s is currently driving states to move to a semester system, along with the issue of transfer student management ease.

### **The California System and the University of California Los Angeles**

In 1966, the Legislature directed the University of California Los Angeles to switch from a semester system to a quarter system as part of a statewide mandate for financial management consistency. Although UCLA opposed the change at the time, the quarter system currently enjoys support. On two occasions, UCLA has formally considered and rejected a return to a semester calendar and currently, there is no significant interest in considering the matter further. UCLA administrators believe that a switch would cost rather than save money and that it’s not worth the cost.

### **Ohio State and Ohio University**

In the late 1960s, the Ohio University Board of Regents directed the university to move from a semester system to a quarter system. Like UCLA, Ohio State University opposed the idea of switching to another calendar. However, there is current support for the quarter system no interest in reverting back to semesters. In a 1996-97 study, administrators estimated that such the move would cost up to \$3 million to change the curriculum, computer systems, and administrative systems while saving \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year. An Ohio university administrator has questioned whether any savings could be realized. He noted that although students would register two rather than three times a year, enrollment services would run for the entire year regardless of the academic calendar. Consequently, he argued that costs associated with keeping the system running would remain constant.

### **Washington State University**

The State College of Washington (WSU) began its academic program in 1892 on the three-quarter system and adopted the semester calendar in fall 1894. With the exception of one academic year (1918-19) during World War I, WSU has remained on a semester system. At least once during each decade from 1919 through the 1970s, Washington State University has studied the merits of moving from a semester calendar to a quarter calendar. In 1949, faculty member Harry E. McAllister published a paper examining a move from semesters to quarters. Of 1,099 postsecondary institutions that “did not include theological seminaries, junior colleges, and negro (sic) colleges,”<sup>3</sup> approximately 82 percent of these institutions were on the semester system.<sup>4</sup> Dr. McAllister concluded that although faculty agreed that a quarter system would better accommodate the State College’s expanding agricultural program, it would be more expensive to administer than a semester system.

The last WSU semester versus quarter study occurred in 1965 when the WSU Associated Student Board published the *ASWSU Board of Control Quarter System Evaluation*. The report’s

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Office of Education Circular No. 248, November 15, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Introduction by Chairman Tom Reid stated that “at no time in the history of higher education in the United States has there been greater interest in the academic calendar than at the present.”

The report summary observed that, “The rapid increase in population following World War II, and the broadening interest of American youth to higher education have combined to produce college and university enrollments that have severely taxed the personnel and physical facilities of most institutions. State legislatures, institutional boards of control, as well as college administrations have sought various ways and means of meeting the demands of rising enrollments.... Obviously the college or university calendar has received critical attention. The traditional American pattern of two semesters, of sixteen weeks each, extending from mid-September into the following June, had been under considerable scrutiny long before the advent of World War II.... However, with the pace and tempo of life appreciation stepped up and the pressure from population increase upon the college and university, some change was and is inevitable. The change had to take the form of greater use of institutional facilities within the school day and within the whole of the academic year, from September 1, through the following August 31.”

The report goes on to recommend that WSU move to a quarter system in order to align its calendar schedule with the growing demands of increased student enrollment. It stated that “in evaluating the merits and drawbacks of the semester and quarter systems, our committee has found the advantages of the quarter system to outweigh those of the semester for students, faculty and administrators. In terms of the university’s total operations and responsibilities to the residents of the state of Washington, the quarter system appears superior. We strongly urge its review in planning for the future.”

Despite this strong endorsement to adopt a quarter calendar by the ASWSU Board, the university retained its semester calendar. However, HECB staff could find no information to determine the rationale supporting this decision.

### **Additional Calendar System Information**

On a national scale since this period, literally every academic calendar change has been from a quarter system to a semester system. The changes have been initiated by state legislatures, trustees or regents, and even by individual institutions. Based on large-scale reports published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and others, most universities favor some version of the semester system over the quarter system, with the favorite being some version of an early semester system in which the first semester ends before Christmas.

Institutions that continue to operate on a quarter system generally have conducted at least one campus-wide study regarding the benefits of moving to a semester system. The issues that are most often raised (without a great deal of supporting evidence) are costs, administrative efficiency, and a superior academic environment that gives students and faculty more time for in-depth study.

The Utah State Legislature required that all state institutions switch to a semester system. Utah State University reported that the principle reason for the Legislature to require all institutions to

change was the Western Governors coalition's desire for coordinated delivery of classes and compatibility with the other universities. However, the single largest factor that is influencing moving to a semester system seems to be the perception that it improves the process of accommodating transfer students, and that there would be better alignment with other systems.

A comprehensive study regarding the issue of semesters vs. quarters was released by a task force at Ohio University 1997 (**Calendar Study Task Force 1996-97**). Ohio University was examining moving from a quarter calendar to a semester calendar. (They retained their quarter calendar.) The study reports that many of the schools studied had hoped for more transfer students as a result of the change. However, none reported this as an observable result. In fact, there are currently degree audit systems and course alignment methods (e.g. Course Applicability System) that accommodate student mobility regardless of the academic calendar employed. In fact, UCLA disagreed with the commonly held perception that the transfer student process is easier when everyone is on the same system. They point out that a sophisticated university can easily handle this by multiplying by  $2/3$  and  $3/2$  and by not getting too concerned over .5 credit hour differences in courses.

The Ohio University report also notes that although more colleges and universities have been changing to semester calendars over the past several years, there have been unanticipated issues. In fact, one member of the task force reports that several schools changing to a semester academic calendar have experienced difficult and "traumatic" periods of adjustment.

Those that have remained with the quarter calendar also have discovered new challenges. For example, with the trend toward semesters, more textbooks are being written for schools using semesters and other higher education activities (e.g. professional conferences for faculty members) are scheduled based on the semester calendar.

One notable exception to the trend of moving from a quarter calendar to a semester calendar is Northwest Missouri State University. Although it did not move to a true quarter system, NW Missouri created a trimester system in an attempt to grow its summer enrollment by making the summer experience more equal to the fall/spring (thus, trimester). It established a goal of 50 percent growth over three years and has reached 34 percent after two years. To market the program, the school has increased financial aid offerings in the summer and experimented with three-year degrees. However, the regular academic year calendar still resembles semesters more than quarters.

## **ADVANTAGES OF QUARTERS VERSUS SEMESTERS**

Following are summaries of the advantages of each system based on anecdotal evidence and opinion, as presented in the Ohio University case study task force report. The report notes that the institutions contacted had no solid evidence to back up their inclinations. In addition, it points out that most of the individuals contacted agreed that no compelling evidence or research exists to support the contention that teaching/learning, research, service, or efficient use of resources is better under one system or the other.

*Advantages of the Quarter System*

- Provides greater variety;
- Enforces focus;
- Offers more chances for success;
- Provides more opportunity to make up for failure;
- Is less significant than a poor semester;
- Is easier to transfer to rather than from a quarter system;
- Is easier to pay bills in smaller bites; and,
- Improves operations of co-op programs.

*Advantages of the Semester System*

- Improves administrative efficiency;
- Eases the transfer student process;
- Facilitates management of the academic calendar;
- Improves efficiency in the use of space;
- Creates savings in student services offices; and,
- Provides additional time for in-depth study by faculty and students.

**QUESTIONS NOT FULLY ADDRESSED**

Although comprehensive, these studies did not address two key issues: 1) alignment with the K-12 calendar and 2) the impact of semesters versus quarters on student retention.

The alignment with the K-12 calendar could not have been anticipated since dual credit with Programs such as Running Start either did not exist or were in very early stages at the time those other reports were produced.

Although the impact on student retention was a major concern, that concern was addressed only in a superficial sense or never really developed at all by any of the reporting states. The idea that semesters may improve retention is worth further study. For any institution that operates on a semester calendar, the premise that retention rates are higher theoretically makes sense, since students can only leave the institution at one point.

In Washington State, three additional factors add substance to this premise:

- 1) Dropout rates have traditionally been highest between the winter and spring quarters when the weather begins to improve after two intense quarters of study;
- 2) Retention rates at WSU have been historically high. For entering freshmen, retention is currently 83 percent;
- 3) Most students still traditionally enter college in the fall. Since most dropouts occur between winter and spring, it is difficult to make up that loss – particularly in the second year of a biennium.

The issue of better alignment with the K-12 system also deserves attention. As a result of education reform efforts occurring in Washington State, qualified high school juniors and seniors

are identifying an assortment of pathways to satisfy high school graduation requirements. Some pathways include dual credit opportunities, such as Running Start, College in the High School, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Tech Prep. The dual credit options provide students with an opportunity to simultaneously earn high school and college credit. In particular, Running Start is a popular option among students, with 12,548 students participating at the community and technical colleges in 1999. This opportunity works well for good students and for students who have planned ahead.

However, because most high schools operate on a semester system and all community colleges operate on a quarter system, the disconnect of academic calendars is particularly difficult for students who for one reason or another must drop mid-term from a class they are taking as part of Running Start. It is also a problem at the beginning of the school year. The community colleges begin classes in late September; high schools generally resume shortly after Labor Day. These scheduling issues are particularly difficult for high school administrators who work with scheduling.

## **WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY'S POSITION**

Currently, Washington State University operates upper-division branch campuses in Spokane, Richland (Tri-Cities), and Vancouver, Washington. For the Tri-Cities and Vancouver in particular, articulation between the local community college and the branch campus in that community is essential in order for students to move efficiently from lower to upper-division study. In the case of the Vancouver branch campus, WSU Vancouver is on a semester system, whereas Clark Community College utilizes a quarter calendar. Administrators at the WSU Vancouver branch campus believe that the two systems do impact articulation between the institutions and would prefer to see both systems utilizing the same calendar, preferably a semester calendar. In particular, they cite problems in aligning the differences with sequential courses.

WSU does not believe that the all-encompassing and expensive change from semesters to quarters would be the best use of state resources or faculty time, particularly with the rest of the country moving in the opposite direction to semesters. They are finding very successful ways to articulate with community colleges, in particular, and as technology continues to play a bigger role in how we work and learn, they believe that we will all be less dependent on time schedules. However, if the Legislature directs and funds WSU to do so, they will certainly follow through.

## **RECOMMENDATION TO THE BOARD**

HECB staff recommends that WSU maintain its current semester calendar based on the following:

- In every case study examined, there is no clear benefit to operating under one system over the other;
- The costs of changing the curriculum from one system to another are far higher than the marginal administrative savings or perceived benefits;



- A move from semesters to quarters runs counter to the national trend of institutions moving from quarters to semesters;
- There are currently degree audit systems and course alignment methods (e.g., Course Applicability System) that accommodate student mobility regardless of the academic calendar employed.

In addition, HECB staff recommends that the state further examine the following issues:

- The impact of semesters versus quarters on retention;
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State/Institution	Previous	Current	Study	Begin	Sem>Qtr	Qtr>Sem	Approval
<b>1. ALABAMA</b>							
• Auburn University	Quarter	Semester	1996	2000		XX	Legislature
<b>2. ARIZONA</b>							
• Arizona State System	Unknown	Mixed	Periodic	No Changes			
<b>3. CALIFORNIA</b>							
(System Change to Qtr - 1966)							
• UCLA	Semester	Quarter	1995	No Change		XX	Institution
• Berkley	Quarter	Semester	None	1970		XX	Institution
• Occidental	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1994		XX	Institution
<b>4. COLORADO</b>							
• Colorado State System	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			
<b>5. CONNECTICUT</b>							
• CT Technical Colleges	Quarter	Semester	Years Ago	Years Ago		XX	
<b>6. DELAWARE</b>							
• Delaware State System	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			
• Delaware CC/Tech System	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1993		XX	Legislature
<b>7. FLORIDA</b>							
• Florida State System	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1980		XX	Regents
<b>8. GEORGIA</b>							
• Georgia State System	Quarter	Semester	1993	Pending		XX	Regents
<b>9. HAWAII</b>							
• Hawaii State System	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Changes			
<b>10. IDAHO</b>							
• Idaho State System	Unknown	Unknown	1997	No Change			
<b>11. LOUISIANA</b>							
• Louisiana State System (1 Institution on Quarters)	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			

State/Institution	Previous	Current	Study	Begin	Sem>Qtr	Qtr>Sem	Approval
<b>12. MARYLAND</b> • Mount Vernon College	Quarter	Semester	No Study	Unknown		XX	Unknown
<b>13. MASSACHUSETTS</b> • Replied – No Studies							
<b>14. MICHIGAN</b> • Michigan State University	Quarter	Semester	1991	Fall 1993		XX	Institution
• MI Technological Institute	Quarter	Semester	1997	Fall 2000		XX	Institution
<b>15. MINNESOTA</b> • Non-University of MN	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	early 1990's		XX	Legislature
• University of Minnesota	Quarter	Semester	1985, 86, 88	1999		XX	Institution
<b>16. MISSOURI</b> • Missouri State System	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			
• NW Missouri State Univ.	Semester	Trimester	Unknown	1998			Institutional
<b>17. MONTANA</b> • Montana State System	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1991		XX	Regents
<b>18. NEVADA</b> • Nevada State System	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			
<b>19. NORTH DAKOTA</b> • North Dakota State System	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1997		XX	
<b>20. OHIO</b> • University of Akron (Changed to Qtr - 1967)	Quarter	Semester	No Study	1978		XX	Regents
• Bowling Green University	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	Fall 1982		XX	Institution
• University of Cincinnati	Quarter	Quarter	1979	No Change		XX	
• Cleveland State University	Quarter	Semester	1995	1998		XX	
• Cuyahoga CC	Quarter	Semester	1995	Fall 1998		XX	Trustees
• Kent State University	Quarter	Semester	No Study	1978		XX	Regents
• Lakeland CC	Quarter	Semester	1996	2000		XX	Trustees

State/Institution	Previous	Current	Study	Begin	Sem>Qtr	Qtr>Sem	Approval
<b>OHIO (Continued)</b>							
• Lorrain CC	Quarter	Semester	1996	Fall, 998		XX	Trustees
• Miami University of Ohio	Quarter	Semester	No Study	1978		XX	President
• Ohio State University	Quarter	Quarter	Unknown	No Change		XX	
• Ohio University	Quarter	Quarter	No Study	No Change			
• Shawnee State University	Quarter	Quarter	Current	Pending		XX	Unknown
• University of Toledo	Quarter	Semester	1995	1997		XX	Unknown
• Washington CC	Quarter	Quarter	1990's	No Change		XX	
• Wright State University	Quarter	Quarter	Current	Pending		XX	
• Youngstown State Univ.	Quarter	Quarter	Current	Pending		XX	
<b>21. OREGON</b>							
• Oregon State System	Quarter	Quarter	1997	No Change		XX	
<b>22. RHODE ISLAND</b>							
• Replied – No Studies							
<b>23. SOUTH CAROLINA</b>							
• SC State System	Mixed	Semester	Unknown	1988		XX	Legislature
• SC State Technical Colleges	Quarter	Semester	Unknown	1990		XX	Legislature
<b>24. TENNESSEE</b>							
• University of Tennessee	Quarter	Semester	1985	Fall 1988		XX	Unknown
<b>25. UTAH</b>							
• Utah State System	Quarter	Semester	1996	1998		XX	Legislature
<b>26. WASHINGTON</b>							
• The Evergreen State College	Quarter	Quarter	Periodic	No Change		XX	
• University of Washington	Quarter	Quarter	No Study	No Change			
• Washington State Univ. (On Quarters 1918-1919)	Semester	Semester	No Study	No Change			

State/Institution	Previous	Current	Study	Begin	Sem>Qtr	Qtr>Sem	Approval
<b>Washington (Continued)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Western Washington Univ.</li> </ul> <b>27. WEST VIRGINIA</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Replied – No Studies</li> </ul>	Quarter	Quarter	Periodic		No Change		XX

## **STATES WITH NO INFORMATION**

1. ALASKA
2. ARKANSAS
3. DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
4. ILLINOIS
5. INDIANA
6. IOWA
7. KANSAS
8. KENTUCKY
9. MAINE
10. MISSISSIPPI
11. NEBRASKA
12. NEW HAMPSHIRE
13. NEW JERSEY
14. NEW MEXICO
15. NEW YORK
16. NORTH CAROLINA
17. SOUTH DAKOTA
18. OKLAHOMA
19. PENNSYLVANIA
20. TEXAS
21. VERMONT
22. VIRGINIA
23. WISCONSIN
24. WYOMING

## **RESOLUTION NO. 00-61**

WHEREAS, The Legislature directed the Higher Education Coordinating Board to study the feasibility of Washington State University operating on a quarter system; and

WHEREAS, Washington State University has operated on a semester system since 1919; and

WHEREAS, There appears to be no clear benefit to operating under one system or the other; and

WHEREAS, The costs of changing the curriculum from one system to another are far higher than the marginal administrative savings or perceived benefits; and

WHEREAS, A move from semesters to quarters runs counter to the national trend of institutions moving from quarters to semesters; and

WHEREAS, There are additional statewide issues that should be examined further;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the Higher Education Coordinating Board recommends to the Legislature that Washington State University maintain its current semester calendar.

Adopted:

December 6, 2000

Attest:

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Bob Craves, Chair

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Kristianne Blake, Secretary